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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON SIGNIFICANT MOVEMENTS IN RECENT THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT. III

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Christianity and History

REQUIRED BOOKS

Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion*.

Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*.

Case, *The Evolution of Early Christianity*.

The books discussed in our last study made it evident that the Christianity of New Testament times differed in certain important respects from the Christianity which we today know and love. The interpreter of Christianity must recognize these differences and show their significance. Many theologians today in dealing with this problem practically ignore the history intervening between New Testament times and the present age. They are content with a comparative study which shall set New Testament Christianity side by side with the Christianity of modern times in such a way as to bring out both the points of identity and the points of difference. The essence of Christianity is then sought in what is common to the faith of the New Testament and the faith of modern times. From this point of view New Testament faith is thought to consist of essential Christianity plus certain non-essential elements characteristic of the thinking of that age. Likewise we may find in modern belief the essential kernel

of original Christianity clothed in incidental modern beliefs. Christianity would thus appear to be a constant spiritual factor, remaining identical throughout Christian history, but clothing itself in different ideas and forms during the vicissitudes of its history.

The full development of the historical method of study makes impossible any such mere quantitative comparative study of Christianity as is suggested in the paragraph above. We know that every religion has a historical development. This means that Christianity, whether in New Testament times or in any other time, is a growing movement rather than a definite quantum of doctrine or experience. The three books which form the basis of our study in this portion of the course all recognize this elemental fact of historical evolution.

Sabatier, in his book, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion*, proposes to deal with religion in general and with Christianity in particular on the basis of the results of a historical and psychological study of religion. Religion is, in Sabatier's opinion, a natural and necessary activity of human experience. It arises because of certain practical needs of life

which cannot be met by anything except religion. Since these human needs have their rise in connection with definite historical circumstances, it follows that the religious answer to these needs at any time will be expressed in terms of the conceptions of the age. Sabatier very suggestively traces the historical evolution of certain religious ideals in such a way as to show this vital interrelation between religion and life as a whole.

Coming to Christianity, Sabatier finds it to be the historical outgrowth of the religion of the Old Testament. The Hebrew religion progressed steadily toward an inward mystic experience of God. At its highest point of development all external rites and ceremonies were subordinated to this primary inner experience. This religion of pure inwardness was set forth by the great prophets. The real essence of Christianity, Sabatier holds, is to be found in the religious consciousness of Jesus. While Jesus was a genuine son of his people, yet his religious experience took a characteristic form which marks the most perfect possible development of religion. He was conscious of a complete and unbroken filial relationship between himself and God. It is this experience of Jesus which constitutes the essence of Christianity. His life revealed the spiritual character of this experience, and his mission consisted in awakening a similar experience in his disciples. He cared little for forms of worship or for theology. These were all incidental. He thus left the Christian life perfectly free to organize itself in ways which should best promote its vitality.

Throughout history men who have experienced this essentially Christian

filial mysticism have organized their religion for purposes of mutual edification and for missionary ends. Thus rituals and theological doctrines arise. Sabatier undertakes to show some of the laws underlying the development of these rites and doctrines. Interesting as they are, they are always subordinate to the religious experience which finds expression through them. In the latter portion of the book Sabatier argues that doctrines and rites are of purely symbolic value. They exist simply to help the inner religious life to find social expression. They are practically necessary, but in no case do they belong essentially to Christianity. Real Christianity is a purely inward experience. In order to find it in any age, we must strip off the historical accretions of doctrine and ritual. This conception of Christianity renders it, as Sabatier believes, free from all the disadvantages which arise if one attempts to identify Christianity with any particular stage in its growth. It allows perfect freedom in theological and ritual expression just because no theology is really essential to true Christianity.

Sabatier has unquestionably given an interesting interpretation of history. But one may question whether he has done justice to all the facts when he defines religion in terms of a purely inward spiritual experience. Can it be said that Jesus was entirely indifferent to beliefs and to forms of worship? Did he have no theology which he considered of primary importance? Is not the filial consciousness which Sabatier singles out as the essence of Christianity really an abstraction? Does it represent truthfully the entire Christianity of Jesus himself? Indeed, is it possible to make so sharp a

distinction between the inward essence of religion and its historical expression? Can we think of Christianity as simply reproducing the typical experience of Jesus with varying incidental accompaniments? Does not every generation, on the contrary, find its religious life kindled, not simply by the inner religious experience of Jesus, but also by the content of the entire Christian tradition?

Sabatier's position is somewhat similar to that of Harnack. He wishes, like Harnack, to think of Christianity as typically and perfectly present in the religious experience of Jesus. He therefore interprets that experience in such a way as to make it appear to be a purely spiritual mysticism capable of inspiring and suffusing various forms of theological thinking. He recognizes, somewhat more generously than Harnack does, the positive value of doctrinal statements. He thus gives to history a subsidiary contribution to the practical expression of Christianity. But after all, we find Christianity in its purest and most genuine form in that inward experience which is independent of historical changes.

This interpretation of history is directly challenged by Loisy, in his remarkable book, *The Gospel and the Church*. This book was written while Loisy was still a loyal member of the Catholic church. Its immediate purpose was to vindicate Catholicism against the criticisms of Harnack. As we have seen, Harnack viewed the development of Catholic doctrine and worship as a corruption of Christianity. He contended that if we wish to be genuine Christians, we should repudiate the non-Christian ecclesiastical organization which has

grown up with the sanction of the Catholic church and should return to the simple gospel of Jesus. This simple gospel Harnack and Sabatier both believe to be identical with a mysticism which is practicable for the modern man. Loisy attacks both these conclusions. In the first place he does not believe that the original gospel of Jesus can be reduced to such a pure spirituality as is indicated by Harnack. In the second place he believes that the gospel has found appropriate expression in the development of the Catholic church, and that this historical evolution of Christianity belongs to the real essence of Christianity.

Loisy frankly states that we must define primitive Christianity in accordance with the results of historical investigation, whether the resulting religion does or does not seem to us appropriate to the modern age. "The rules of a healthy criticism," says he, "forbid the resolution to regard as non-essential all that today must be judged uncertain or unacceptable." When we thus face the facts, it becomes evident that the eschatological interpretation of history formed an essential part of the religious experience of Jesus. Indeed, so prominent is this idea of the coming Kingdom in the teaching of Jesus that Loisy contends that "the historian should set the essence of the gospel in this hope, since no other idea holds so prominent and so large a place in the teaching of Jesus." In other words, if we are true to the facts of history we must deny the validity of Sabatier's conception of Christianity as something so purely spiritual as to be able to avoid all entangling alliances with history. On the contrary, Jesus himself used the traditions of his day as positive

elements in his gospel. There has never been any purely spiritual form of Christianity. Always living faith has been positively interwoven with traditions and theories which belong to the age in which it is expressing itself.

If, now, the gospel as Jesus proclaimed it was vitally interwoven with definite ideas of cosmology and of politics, it is to be expected that the Christianity of every age will have its body of philosophical, political, and social doctrines. The Catholic church represents precisely this normal evolution. Seeking always to be true to the spirit of Jesus, it has nevertheless sought to make positive use of historical development. It can thus meet the needs of changing conditions by adapting the spirit of the gospel to the specific needs of each new generation. Christianity is thus an ever-living, ever-developing, religion, preserving the precious spiritual message of the gospel in an unbroken process of religious evolution. The church of today is as rightful and as genuine an expression of Christianity as was the primitive community. Christianity is essentially a never-ending historical movement, in which the spiritual power of the gospel finds infinitely varied ways of expression.

Since writing this book, Loisy has been forced to sever his connection with the Catholic church. For while Catholicism agrees with Loisy in the doctrine that the present church represents real Christianity, it cannot admit Loisy's interpretation of the New Testament. Loisy affirmed that the original form of the gospel included elements which we today must reject. The Catholic church wishes to believe that the original gospel, when rightly interpreted, contains

positively, either explicitly or implicitly, the infallible program which the church has ever since been following. That is, official Catholicism would agree with Harnack that the perfect and complete essence of Christianity is to be found in the teachings of Jesus. But Catholicism insists that these teachings authorize the entire structure of the Catholic church as it is today; while Harnack insists that the gospel of Jesus authorizes nothing except a typical religious experience. Loisy departs from both in that he does not believe that Christianity can be defined conclusively and unchangeably in terms of the teachings of Jesus. Christianity is always historically conditioned. There is no "pure" form of it which may be found to be free from all non-Christian elements. Christianity is always in the process of evolution. This conception is fatal to the presuppositions of both Catholicism and Protestantism, both of which have been accustomed to look to the New Testament for an infallible and changeless definition of Christianity.

Nevertheless, Loisy is not quite willing to let Christianity be defined in a purely empirical fashion. He, too, feels that it is essentially something "changeless" in essence. He defends the continued use of ancient creeds in modern worship on the ground that modern Christians, however they may differ in their thinking from ancient Christians, are nevertheless living under the impetus of the same vital faith. "Faith," he says, "addresses itself to the unchangeable truth, through a formula, necessarily inadequate, capable of improvement, consequently of change." The church presents its dogmas to believers "as the least imperfect expression that is morally

possible." Even when one ceases to take literally the statements of a creed, the statements have a "real dogmatic meaning" which "remains unaltered." To many readers it will seem that Loisy has here spoken in response to his feeling of duty to the church rather than in accordance with the historical principles which he has expounded. He is still attempting to think of Christianity as a single unity, authoritatively established and continuing with authoritative self-identity down through the ages.

If we regard Christianity as a never-ceasing growth, the question inevitably presents itself as to whether we are to think of its origins as well as of its later phases in terms of evolution. Loisy suggests the evolutionary point of view in part when he asserts that Jesus held the traditions of his time and lived out his religion in terms of these traditions. Thus the message of Jesus is set in vital relationship to the stream of messianic thought of the time. Nevertheless, the beginnings of Christianity are not treated by Loisy in any thoroughgoing fashion in terms of historical evolution. This is doubtless partly due to the fact that he is engaged in a polemic against Harnack and therefore formally accepts the limitations of Harnack's treatment of the subject.

The broader historical interpretation of early Christianity has been advancing rapidly during the past decade. The last years of the nineteenth century made us familiar with the extensive use of contemporary Jewish movements of thought in the understanding of the growth of early Christian ideas. Recently attention has been turned to the fact that Christianity had its main growth on

Greco-Roman soil. The attempt is now being made to understand how current aspects of gentile thinking conditioned the development of Christian doctrine. Case's book, *The Evolution of Early Christianity*, is a pioneer attempt to interpret early Christianity consistently and completely in terms of historical evolution.

The key to Case's interpretation of Christianity is to be found in his contention that we must not think of doctrines or rites as entities apart from the thinking and acting of the persons who employ the doctrines and rites. If we want to know what early Christianity really was, we must not seek some quantum of belief, which we may designate as the "essence" of Christianity. We must rather seek to understand how Christian men in the first century were feeling and thinking and acting. "Christianity was not at the outset, nor did it ever become primarily, an abstract quantity of doctrine, ethics, or ritual. Christians produced dogma, defined rules of conduct, and established ritualistic observances, but these were secondary to the vital activity of actual Christian persons." Case here strikes at what is probably the most prevalent fault in theological discussion. We are prone to think that we have given an adequate explanation of any theological movement when we can label it. We speak of various "isms" as if they were actual entities, instead of being abstractions. To call attention back to the actual life of Christian men as the primary reality is a much-needed exhortation.

Following this conception of the nature of Christianity, Case attempts to let us see exactly how men were aspiring,

thinking, and achieving in the world in which Christianity arose. The *Zeitgeist* in which the early Christians lived was not an alien realm from which they drew ready-made certain concepts which they could apply to theological problems. It was the very mental atmosphere in which they did their thinking. It entered spontaneously and creatively into that thinking. To picture Jesus or the early disciples as having passively taken over Jewish apocalyptic ideas, as if these were somehow mere externals of their real religious thinking, is historically and psychologically inconceivable. The primitive Christians did their religious thinking creatively and vitally in terms of this apocalyptic hope. It was just as vital, just as essential, to their Christianity as any other feature. From this point of view, to attempt to strip off the eschatological elements of early belief means to do violence to early Christianity. Belonging as it does integrally to early Christianity, eschatology must be left in its full significance just as it is, as a necessary aspect of the Christianity of that age.

The most original portion of Case's book is that dealing with the environment in which gentile Christians did their thinking. Here again we must not think of Paul's converts as being somehow "Christians" in isolation from their environment, and then as coming to terms with certain prevalent pagan ideas in an external fashion. The Christianity of men in Asia Minor and in Greece was worked out positively in terms of the kind of religious thinking which was creatively vital in the social consciousness of the people. Harnack in his history of dogma calls this process the

"Hellenization" of Christianity; and he means by this that a Christianity conceived as originally pure was corrupted by being combined with hellenistic elements. Case contends that there never was any such "pure" Christianity. The hellenistic form of it was just as genuinely a creative religious movement as was the form of it which we find represented in the synoptic accounts of the teachings of Jesus. In both cases we find a Christianity in the making, as men think out their problems, using all the means at their disposal.

While Case's book is simply a historical presentation of the facts ascertainable about the early stages of Christian development, certain theological implications of his position should be noted. In the first place, he insists that Christianity can be truthfully defined only in terms of its actual historical development. To seek for a non-historical "essence" lying behind the history is to forsake fact for imagination. Christianity is what it is at any time. Early Christianity is to be defined precisely in terms of the thinking and the behavior of early Christians. We may or may not approve today certain aspects of their Christianity. Whether we do or not, we must truthfully recognize early Christianity for what it actually was.

A second implication is the abandonment of any attempt to define Christianity primarily in terms of an "essence" which abides unchanged from age to age. It is certain that a New Testament Christian would feel that we had left out an essential in eliminating apocalyptic eschatology from our definition of Christianity. That which is common to

our faith and to the early Christian's belief would be felt by him to be far too meager to express the "essence" of Christianity. It is a fair question whether, if we actually survey all the details of modern faith and abandon any attempt at forced exegesis, we should not feel, on the other hand, that the New Testament gives too little emphasis to some things which we deem "essential." Troeltsch, for example, says that there is in the New Testament no ethics of production in the industrial realm. There is simply an ethics of distribution. Can the modern man be content unless he includes an ethics of production as an essential in his Christianity?

The outcome of a thoroughgoing historical interpretation of Christianity is the recognition of the fact that Christianity is always in the making. For convenience' sake we can characterize certain stages in its history by the use of adjectives. We can speak of Jewish Christianity, of Pauline Christianity, of Nicene Christianity, of Catholic Christianity, of early Protestant Christianity, of Modernist Christianity. But historical accuracy compels us to value each type in terms of its *entire content*. To estimate any type in terms of that which is common to all types or to judge any type by reference to any other type, taken as an authoritative standard, means to cease to interpret the facts in their entirety.

So far as the theological task of our own age is concerned, the implications of the historical point of view are clear. If Christianity is always in the making, our own Christianity is also in the making. If early Christianity was due to the

creative vigor with which Christians employed all the resources known to them in the solution of their religious problems, and if their theology grew out of a facing of their own problems in this spirit, the theology of any age will grow out of precisely such a frank and reverent facing of the problems of the age with the determination to use all the resources of the age to aid in the solution. A modern theology will not be produced by trying to reproduce ancient doctrines. It will not come by trying to find "equivalents" for ancient doctrines which have ceased to have convincing power. It will come as the result of courageous thinking in terms of the best which our age can supply—including, of course, the invaluable stimulus which comes from our Christian tradition. What modern men want to know is what kind of salvation is possible for us in the world as we know it. That question must be answered primarily in terms of the ideas and the processes which seem to be real to men of this age. Just as early Christianity arose out of the environment of men in the first century, so modern Christianity must arise out of the environment of men in the twentieth century.

Thus we are brought again to the point emphasized in the first study. Theology today needs to learn to use the question "What is true?" instead of the question "What is authorized?" If we can see, as Case has helped us to see, that the Christianity of the New Testament was really developed in precisely this spirit of creative spontaneity, we need not hesitate to use the method of free inquiry in the development of our own theology.

ADDITIONAL LITERATURE BEARING ON
THE SUBJECT

The historical method has only recently been seriously employed in the interpretation of theology. That it will profoundly influence the development of theology during the next few years is certain. Cardinal Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* is a typical discussion by one who recognized the real changes wrought by history, but who still wished to maintain a super-historical origin of Christianity.—An excellent supplement to the reading of Loisy's book is *The Programme of Modernism*, containing the papal encyclical against Modernism and the reply of a group of Modernists.—The Modernist controversy called forth an interesting book by Newman Smyth, entitled *Passing Protestantism and Coming Catholicism*.—Pfleiderer's *Evolution and Theology* is a book of essays, some of which deal explicitly with the definition of Christianity in terms of historical development.—A forceful and suggestive protest against discrediting the later history of Christianity as compared with its beginnings found expression in an article of Edward Caird's, entitled "Christianity and the Historic Christ" in the *New World* (March, 1897).—The difficulty of trying to maintain an absolute religion based on historical details was brilliantly set forth by an article of A. O. Lovejoy's, entitled "The Entangling Alliance of Religion and History," in the *Hibbert Journal*, V (January, 1907), 258.—Percy Gardner's *The Growth of Christianity* is a suggestive account of the enlargement and enrichment of Christianity through historical development.—An adverse criticism of the historical method in

theology is furnished by H. R. Mackintosh, in an article entitled "Does the Historical Study of Religions Yield a Dogmatic Theology?" in the *American Journal of Theology*, XIII (October, 1909), 505.—A positive exposition of the theological outcome of the historical method is found in an article by E. Troeltsch, entitled "The Dogmatics of the 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,'" in the *American Journal of Theology*, XVII (January, 1913), 1.—G. B. Smith discussed the problem in an article, "Theology and the History of Religion," in the *Biblical World*, XL (September, 1912), 173.—The history of Christianity is interpreted in terms of a growing theological appreciation by Shailer Mathews in *The Development of Religion*, soon to be published.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does it impair the religious value of a doctrine if it can be shown to have a natural historical origin?
2. Are those aspects of Christianity which are "original" more valuable than those which were derived from non-Christian sources?
3. Can Christianity be accurately characterized as a religion of purely inward experience?
4. What are the defects in Loisy's defense of Catholicism?
5. If gentile ideas entered into the development of the religion of the New Testament what can be said as to the "authority" of these ideas?
6. Is the pressure for theological changes best met today by attempts at *re-construction* of doctrine?